

1-1-1973

Listening skills: a review of the literature and practical suggestions for the teaching of these skills in the primary levels

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LISTENING SKILLS:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
AND
PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS
FOR THE TEACHING OF THESE SKILLS
IN THE PRIMARY LEVELS

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A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION
(READING SPECIALIST)
AT CARDINAL STRITCH COLLEGE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

1973

This research paper has been
approved for the Graduate Committee
of Cardinal Stritch College by

George Hertelle
(Advisor)

Date March 1, 1973

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express gratitude to the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita, Kansas, who provided the opportunity to pursue graduate study in the field of reading.

Sincere appreciation is given to Mr. George Cretilli, the advisor, for his encouragement and advice.

A special thank you is extended to the writer's family and friends who helped in countless ways to make this study possible.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

"More failures in academic and social growth can be traced to the inability to listen more than to any other single aspect of the language arts."¹

If the above statement is true then we as teachers have a great task to perform. The skill of listening can be acquired through self-direction and self-discipline, but with creative guidance.

Young children can be motivated very easily. The imaginative and creative teacher shall take advantage of every situation to impart the skill. There should also be times when a certain amount of "planned listening" activities take place.

Part of the readiness program for beginning readers involves listening and it is at this level that the greatest efforts on listening have been placed. But we are learning

¹Mark A. Neville, "Listening is an Art," Elementary English, XXII (April, 1959), 226.

that if we are to help pupils continually to read better we must have a constant and progressive program of readiness in listening throughout all the school years.

In our search for ways, methods and techniques of helping children become better listeners we should not lose sight of the fact that the listening coin has two faces. Children need to know how and when to listen and how and when not to listen. There are many times when children need to be able to "tune out" their listening sets.

Nichols states that our listening training has often consisted of a long series of admonitions extending from first grade to college. Pay Attention! Now Get This! Open Up Your Ears! Listen!²

In surveying the literature in the area of listening one gets the impression that it is the forgotten skill. If this is the case then we as dedicated teachers must take action. We can no longer ignore our task. We must do our part to teach our children to discipline their ears and we must learn to discipline our own.

We as wise teachers should also encourage parents to help us in the task of teaching listening. For as in the other areas of the Language Arts or any skill there must be

²Ralph G. Nichols and A. Leonard Stevens, Are You Listening? (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 10.

cooperation. Schools and homes are going to have to work hand in hand in teaching the skills of listening. We also have to teach our pupils how to be more discriminating in what they listen to.

Primary teachers that truly do their job in teaching the listening skills shall not only help their pupils now, but will also give them an excellent foundation. The attitudes of these students will help in their future learning. The teaching of the skill of listening is certainly very valuable when one considers the amount of time one spends listening every day. All depends on listening at all levels in order to learn. Perhaps because listening is so much a part of everything we do and because all but the hard of hearing can listen with tolerable success, the need to train in this skill has not seemed as vital as the need to train the skills of reading, writing and speaking.

In conclusion, there is at present a great concern about listening. The number of studies being made is great, but much work has yet to be made in regard to a program that will be incorporated into a school curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

The primary purpose of this paper is to survey the literature pertaining to the teaching of the listening skills.

The secondary purpose is to suggest practical techniques for the instruction of this valuable skill.

Scope and Limitations of the Investigation

This study is limited to the primary levels with the intention that if the children in the early years of education learn to listen, they shall enrich this skill as they progress in their formal education.

The literature is limited to periodicals and books. At present there is a dearth of valuable research on the teaching of listening in the primary levels.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Value of Skill

Just how much constructive effort are our schools attaching to the importance of teaching this matter of good listening?

Certainly little was done in the direct teaching of this skill in the schools of yesteryear.

During the past ten years, however, there are many evidences that listening is being given more attention in the way of systematic instruction.

Many magazine articles have been written and several books have been devoted to this area of the Language Arts.

"Listening is not a new skill. However, it has only relatively recently received attention as one of the crucial skills involved in Reading."¹

¹Donald S. Leeds, "Listening: Summary of Research Studies," The Journal of Reading Specialist, X (October, 1970), p. 50.

During the 1950's, Nichols and Stevens wrote one of the first books devoted to listening. These educators declared, "Incredible as it may seem when we think about this is that this book to our knowledge is the first close analysis ever made of the oldest, the most used and most important element of interpersonal communication--Listening."²

Curriculum Evaluation

In 1952, The English Language Arts published a report based on a five year study by the commission on the English Curriculum of the National Council of Teachers of English.

This report stated clearly that good listening habits must not be left to chance and that there is a need for carefully graded training in the listening skill just as there is in similar needs in reading.³ Russell tells us that research on the need and value of the teaching of listening goes back even to an earlier and much quoted study; Rankin found that Americans spend thirty percent of the time they

²Dorothy Kendall Brachen, Research and Practice in Improving Listening. Third I.R.A. World Congress on Reading. Sidney, Australia. International Reading Association. Newark, Delaware: 1968-1969.

³Ellen J. Figurel, Reading and Realism. Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Convention International Reading Association (Newark, Delaware: 1968-1969), p. 122.

devote to language use each day speaking, sixteen percent in reading, nine percent in writing and forty-five percent in listening.⁴

It was, however, in 1962 that Sam Duker published his extensive bibliography of professional articles and studies in listening, he listed 725 studies done since 1917.

Duker found that approximately 200 of the studies listed in the bibliography mentioned previously were devoted to showing the interrelationship between reading and listening.⁵

The greatest contribution given to the research on listening came when Sam Duker's marvelous book on "Listening" was published.

In this book, Duker states that "Listening instruction has become more common at all levels of formal and informal education. The literature on listening ranges from reports of research studies to enthusiastic but misguided articles written with missionary zeal."⁶

⁴David H. Russell and Elizabeth F. Russell, Listening Aids Through the Grades (New York: Columbia University, Bureau of Publications' Teacher's College, 1959), p. 4.

⁵Elizabeth Frazier, "Teaching Listening in the Elementary Schools," Reading Realism, ed. by Allen J. Figurel, Vol. 13 (Newark, Delaware: I.R.A. 1968-1969), p. 68.

⁶Sam Duker, Listening: Readings (New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1966), p. 10.

In another part of his book he states that "coordination of research on listening is poor as it is in other areas. Duplication of investigations are seriously wasteful when so much remains to be done. Availability of the completed studies have been improved by the use of microfilm but serious research reports are still not sufficiently accessible."⁷

The value of teaching the listening skills has become a must in the light of all the current and modern literature.

Walter Barbe says it this way, "We need to teach the listening skills as an important aspect of the Language Arts Program."⁸

Along the same trend one finds that some authors do believe that the listening skills can and should be taught. Nichols believes that "the barriers to listening training that have been built up by false assumptions are coming down, for educators are realizing that listening is a skill that can be taught."⁹

The problem of time is a real one but possibly not as serious as often thought to be. In the first place, much

⁷Ibid., p. 160.

⁸Walter B. Barbe and Robert M. Myers, "Developing Listening Ability in Children," Elementary English, XXXI (February, 1954), p. 84.

⁹Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens, Are You Listening? (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 14.

can be done to improve listening ability without adding a new course into an already burdened curriculum.

Listening skills may be improved by integrating them with presently established classroom activities of an oral nature.

Figurel reminds us that "few teachers have received actual instruction in how to listen critically, however, one definitely needs to acquire the skill before attempting to transfer it to students."¹⁰

Young children can be motivated very easily. The teacher that is creative and imaginative can use materials on hand or inquire from others.

Primary teachers must see to it that there is much "Planned" listening for the young. As Applegate says "every teacher has to discover for herself the best way to interest the class in the art of listening."¹¹

Although a certain amount of growth in listening will result from attention to listening in daily instruction and an improved listening climate, greater growth will be achieved when a planned program of listening is provided.

Primary children especially need to learn listening in order to think, follow directions, dramatize and to create if the child is to develop satisfactory listening skills in order to become courteous and responsive.

¹⁰Figurel, op. cit., p. 71.

¹¹Maurice Applegate, Easy In English (Evanston, Illinois: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 94.

Anderson also gives us good advice when he says "At times the teacher is wisest who remains silent and waits for children to react."¹²

All programs of listening should start with some type of appraisal in regard to students' existing listening skills, then, in order to evaluate the program the same measures should be used at other times.

Baker states that "even though standardized and teacher made listening tests may be criticized justly on several fronts, it is still desirable to attempt to measure listening skills. Even though the instruments available may be relatively "crude" they are still better than none at all."¹³

Primary teachers have a few tests on hand. Among them is the Durrell Listening Test for Primary Grades. According to Applegate "homemade informal testing exercises are almost better than commercial ones in finding out how well children listen."¹⁴

¹²Paul S. Anderson, Language Skills in Elementary Education (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), p. 23.

¹³Larry L. Baker, Listening Behavior (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1971), p. 146.

¹⁴Applegate, op. cit., p. 95.

Teacher-Pupil Attitude

Pupils can help to set standards of good listening for themselves. The truly interested teacher of the lower grades will not have troubles finding ways to accomplish this evaluative process.

Is listening then really so important? Nichols puts it this way, "In this age of the spoken word, it is no longer wise to allow our children to proceed through school with little or no formal attention to listening."¹⁵

¹⁵Nichols, op. cit., p. 221.

CHAPTER III

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR PRIMARY TEACHERS

Nichols tells us that "instructional materials for listening improvement usually have to be created by the teacher herself. Slowly it is safe to predict, prepared listening courses will be developed and be made available to the teachers."¹

The above statement being true, what does the teacher of listening skills do in the mean time?

Sam Duker gives us some very valuable helps in the teaching of the listening skills.

1. A teacher must keep in mind that any listening activities in the classroom should be a pleasurable rather than a threatening experience.
2. Daily class activities should be so planned that the amount of listening required of the children is not overpowering and impossible.
3. It is extremely important that listening in classroom situations not be confined to listening by the children to the teacher. . . . pupils learn to listen to each other and above all, that the teacher show by her example she is listening to her pupils,

¹Ralph G. Nicols and Leonard A. Stevens, Are You Listening? (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 208.

that she regards listening as a valuable and important activity. Classroom listening should be "for" rather than "at".²

Russell gives teachers a very practical list of helps for kindergarten and primary activities in listening:

A. Kindergarten and Early Primary Activities

1. Sounds around us.
2. Animal sounds.
3. Imitating.
4. Follow directions.
5. Identifying people.
6. Rhyming.
7. Interpreting meaning.

B. Primary

1. General.
2. Recognizing whole words.
3. Rhyming games.
4. Listening games.
5. Listening for initial consonants.
6. Listening for main ideas.
7. Listening for sequence of ideas.
8. Following directions.
9. Auding for details.
10. Critical listening.
11. Using audio and visual aids.³

Applegate gives other helps on upper primary level.

I. Listen to Think

- a. Write simple summaries.
"Why I would like to own a Kangaroo."
- b. Writing after character analysis.
"If John lived next to me what kind of a neighbor would he be?"

²Sam Duker, "How Listening Can Be Taught," Instructor, LXIV, No. 9 (May, 1955).

³David H. Russell and Elizabeth F. Russell, Listening Aids Through the Grades, p. 56.

- c. Thinking after informational materials.
"Why I'd love to visit this country or go to the zoo."
- d. Thinking through an arithmetic problem.
Listen: I am reading this problem only once.
- e. Listening to solve a riddle.
"Draw the answer".
- f. Listening for sequence.
"Use numbers or play game: If I were going, I'd take."

II. Listen to Follow Directions

- a. Listening for word meanings.
"In the story pick out all words that mean move."
- b. Listening to the sound of words.
"jiggle" "wiggle" "giggle"
- c. Thinking of the right word for the right meaning.
"I'm thinking of words to tell how you feel when you are happy."

III. Listen to Dramatize

- a. Dramatizing the action suggested by a paragraph.
"Listen to the paragraph and then act out."
- b. Dramatize the action suggested by this poem.
Read poem, "The Grasshopper".

IV. Listen to Create

- a. Tell of community helpers.
"Draw pictures."
- b. Listen to records or recordings.
"Draw what you hear, 'Peter and the Wolf', the 'Nutcracker Suite'."⁴

In the listening program set up with the help of Sam Duker, he stated some of the objectives to be carried out in a planned program.

⁴Maurice Applegate, Easy In English, p. 90.

1. Using the most common device of having children close their eyes and listen for sounds asked by one person or teacher.
2. Musical records were played after a carefully prepared list motivating questions had been asked.
3. Practice was given in following a gradually lengthening series of oral directions in the form of a game.
4. Listening for various kinds of sounds on walks around the neighborhood was substantially improved by discussions of possible sounds before taking the walks.
5. Listening games, some old, some new, can be frequently played like "The Whispering Game."
6. Present films such as "When Jimmy Didn't Listen," (Stanley-Browner Co.), draw pictures and have oral discussions.
7. Children can make up charts on listening.

A. Why Should We Listen?

1. We want to learn our lesson.
2. We want to hear directions.
3. We want to hear what others are saying.
4. We wish to be polite.
5. We want others to listen to us.

B. What Makes Us Want to Listen?

1. We listen if the speaker talks loud and clear.
2. We listen when the talk is not too long.
3. We listen when the speaker is nice.
4. We listen when the talk is interesting.⁵

⁵Sam Duker, "How Listening Can Be Taught," p. 76.

Teachers who feel the need for teaching listening skills are often worried as to the Know How needed.

They become frustrated when unable to find textbooks on the subject and, of course, these are mostly nonexistent. However, already professional journals, especially those in Speech and English, are now producing much material such as outlines in this area.

The alert, imaginative and dedicated teacher who is interested in teaching listening skills will always be searching for and finding helps.

Applegate assures us "every school day, however crowded, has a few minutes to listen lovingly! Music sometimes as children paint, read or write--these are the things that rest the soul and help children to listen lovingly."⁶

No matter what method is used, the teachers first must give instruction on why listening is important. It is important because it is used in schools, on playgrounds, at home and any other place where one goes. This in turn will help them to enjoy the world in which they live.

The skill of listening can help children to appreciate the sense of hearing. There are a great many activities one can use for sounds. The sounds of the home, street,

⁶ Maurice Applegate, Easy In English, p. 5.

the circus, the forest, etc.--these will make children alert to the great sounds of a wonderful world that they help to make.

The teaching of listening for meaning is also very important.

The activities should contain such things as listening to music, poetry, stories, reports and even descriptions of things. This should help to acquire the ability to listen for specific purposes, such as appreciation, information and critical evaluation. Many opportunities to talk about things that interest children should be made available.

As they share experiences, hobbies, books and opportunities to listen as well as practice in the skill of speaking--they gain in listening skills.

In this modern day of communication, a teacher can use T.V., records, tapes, films, filmstrips, and even the radio to help in teaching listening.

Children come to school and are often lonely, not only in the commonly accepted sense of that word but mentally, educationally and intellectually lonely.

This fact offers an unparalleled opportunity for the creative thinking teacher who can use listening experiences as a pathway to lead these children out of their sterile, intellectual loneliness to a rich realization of the values offered by others.

Teaching this kind of listening can become a way of teaching the art of living and that, after all, is the true function that we as teachers have to perform.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Listening is a skill. It can be improved through training and practice, just as can reading, writing and speaking.

However, if we weigh our educational systems in terms of communication instruction, we find that almost all of the formal attention is given to the teaching of reading and writing, some to speaking, and almost none is paid to listening.

Paul Keller states that "in spite of research advance, it is probably fair to say that much more is needed to be done than has been done. A look at research in comparable fields (e.g. reading, speaking) makes listening research look embryonic."¹

¹Paul Keller, "Major Findings in Listening in the Past Ten Years," Listening: Readings, ed. Sam Duker (New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1966), p. 153.

The literature in the area of research for listening skills in primary or elementary grades is scarce if not almost nonexistent.

There are very few reliable studies on the effectiveness of listening when compared with the rest of the research. Moreover relatively few of the studies or materials presently published give any constructive help to the classroom teaching.

In the outstanding book on listening studies done by Sam Duker, Harold A. Anderson makes a rather thought filled statement "a conclusion that is inescapable is that listening May result in learning But listening is Not learning and neither wishing NOR LISTENING will make it So."²

In another section of this book, Herbert Hackett tells us that:

It has been demonstrated that:

1. We know almost nothing about listening outside of the field of acoustics; the valid studies number less than twenty compared, for example, with probably 3,000 about reading.
2. There is no basic research because few of us have training to form testable hypothesis, to prepare the instruments for testing or to evaluate what we have tested. We lack the scientific rigor; we lack the scientific inclination.

²Harold A. Anderson, "Needed Research in Listening," Listening: Readings, ed. Sam Duker (New York: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1966), p. 188.

3. Most of us or our instruction is of the "hoo--rah" or as John Coffrey says, "the chatsy-patsy, lend-me-your-ears-folks, variety". Much of this instruction consists of "Listen . . . it." No wonder, he continues, "so much of our communications research . . . either regurgitive or soothingly and unarguably platitudinous."³

The teacher of listening can take to heart the words of Applegate stated so beautifully: "America needs disciplined ears; ears that take ideas from the assembly line of life and fashion new and better thoughts and implements of living for themselves and others."⁴

We as wise teachers should also encourage parents to help us in the task of teaching listening. For as in the other areas of the Language Arts or any skill, there must be cooperation.

May we as teachers of reading not add to the failure of a child either in academic or social growth because we have failed to impart the skill of Listening.

Conclusions

Listening, an act accepted by children and adults as second nature, is rapidly becoming one of our newest and most intriguing educational frontiers. This skill has

³Herbert Hackett, "A Null Hypothesis: There is not Enough Evidence," Listening: Readings, ed. Sam Duker (New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1966), p. 456.

⁴Maurice Applegate, Easy in English, p. 125.

had most of its research done in the last few years since 1952.

Listening is no longer the forgotten "gem" of the Language Arts. However, due to a dearth of material available in the primary and elementary levels, teachers shall have to be creative in order to present the skill.

The future looks very promising! People like Sam Duker give teachers courage to press forward in the area of Listening.

The research begun will continue to help until further and more concrete material is published.

Modern technology, especially T.V., offers educators a great challenge.

We can no longer wait to be told we must instruct our students in the Listening Skills. Nor can we wait till the administrators or curriculum fix a set schedule. Neither can we wait till all materials become available.

The time is now. We can no longer delay. Tomorrow may prove to be too late.

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